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SUBJECT: EX-PREMIER'S NEW POLITICAL PARTY HAS RUSSIA TIES,  
BUT WHAT OTHER SUPPORT?

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i., Damian R. Leader  
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Former Lithuanian Prime Minister Kazimira Prunskiene, whose popularity with voters has tumbled in recent years, has founded a new political party that has drawn attention because of its open ties with Russian politicians. The meeting to establish the party was attended by the Russian ambassador to Lithuania, the chairman of the Russian Duma's International Affairs Committee and other officials from Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan. The new party calls for closer economic and political ties with Russia and with other neighboring countries, both east and west. End summary.

¶2. (U) Prunskiene, who was Lithuania's first post-independence prime minister nearly 20 years ago and agriculture minister in the Social Democrat-led government that left office just over one year ago, has seen her political success wither recently. Although she finished a close second in the 2004 presidential election and her Peasants Party won 10 seats in the Seimas (parliament) later that year, the party failed to cross the 5 percent threshold in October 2008 parliamentary elections, and she herself lost in a single-mandate district. She won less than 4 percent of the votes in the 2009 presidential election; during the campaign some media outlets referred to her as "the Kremlin's candidate." She left the Peasants Party this July and almost immediately announced her plans to form a new party.

¶3. (U) On December 5, all 407 delegates at a congress voted to formally establish that party, the Lithuanian People's Union (LPU), and selected Prunskiene as its leader. Media reported that large delegations of Russian, Kazakhstani and Belarusian politicians and officials also attended the congress. Among them were Russia's ambassador to Lithuania and Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the International Affairs Committee of the Duma of the Russian Federation (RF). At the congress, Kosachev read a message of congratulations from the RF Duma Speaker, Boris Gryzlov, who also is board chairman of the ruling United Russia political party.

¶4. (U) Kosachev had refused an invitation for a formal meeting with Audronius Azubalis, chairman of the Seimas foreign-affairs committee, while he was in Lithuania. At the party congress, Kosachev criticized most other Lithuanian political forces: "Unfortunately, many political parties of Lithuania ground their positions towards Russia on antagonism and demonizations, and there is nothing we can discuss with these parties. I am very happy that Prunskiene's speech stated a constructive stance on Russia, and here we will definitely be allies and partners." He said, "I cannot find any well-grounded explanations behind the almost anti-Russian campaigns declared by Lithuania's political elites, and I believe they do not answer the spirit of the age or Lithuania's interests." He predicted that the LPU and his party, United Russia, would "work together to normalize the relations between Russia and Lithuania."

15. (U) Lithuanian Foreign Minister Vygaudas Usackas told journalists he was "unpleasantly surprised" by Kosachev's statement, and said that the participation of an official of Kosachev's rank in the constituent assembly of a new political party was indicative of Russian efforts to influence Lithuanian domestic politics. Usackas said Kosachev's statement and his refusal to meet with his Lithuanian counterpart were "not compatible with the constructive cooperation dialogue that we seek in our relations with Russia."

16. (U) Lithuanian political analyst Tomas Janeliunas said United Russia's overtures to a Lithuanian party were a new tactic. "The bulk of Lithuania's society sees Russia as an unfriendly country," he said. "Either the public appearance of guests from Russia is intended for a small portion of Lithuanian voters who may like the demonstration of friendship with Russia's ruling forces, or else this is a poor political strategy adopted by Prunskiene." Analysts said the new party would likely find some support among disenchanted pensioners, the jobless and low-skilled workers who are upset about recent cuts to social benefits and long for the return of Soviet-style state paternalism.

17. (U) Prunskiene said the LPU plans to put together a candidate list for 2011 local-government elections. The next Seimas elections are to be held in 2012, and the next presidential poll in 2014. In her speech to the congress, Prunskiene said she did not worry about the LPU being tagged as pro-Russian, because that was where Lithuania should look for strategic relations and to seek benefits. "We have to stop demonstrating hostility towards important economic partners, Russia and Belarus, and make better use of various fields of cooperation," she said.

18. (C) Prunskiene, 66, was a member of the Soviet Communist Party from 1980-90. In 1989, she won election to the USSR Supreme Soviet in the first semi-independent elections in the Soviet Union. She served one year in the Supreme Soviet and became a founding member of the Sajudis independence movement. In 1989 she was deputy prime minister of Lithuania, and in 1990 she led the first post-Communist Cabinet in Lithuania. She resigned in January 1991 after liberalization of prices sparked protests. Prunskiene has never been seen as very pro-American, and has said that Lithuania should pursue close ties with Europe over close ties with the United States.

19. (U) Lithuania's Lustration Commission in September found that Prunskiene had secretly collaborated with the Soviet KGB by performing intelligence and counterintelligence tasks. That ruling was based on a 1992 court decision. But a different court ruled in 2003 that it saw insufficient evidence to prove Prunskiene's collaboration with the KGB. Prunskiene has appealed the Lustration Commission finding.

110. (C) COMMENT: The Lithuanian People's Party is the latest in a long list of top-down Lithuanian parties created as personal vehicles by known politicians and other personalities. While some of these parties have enjoyed short-term success, none has been able to break into the ranks of the biggest and most successful parties -- which are those that are driven more by political ideology rather than the ambitions of their founders. Prunskiene's new party has drawn attention for two reasons: because of her relative celebrity, and because of its unusual ties with Russia. At a time when many Lithuanians, including politicians and military leaders, are increasingly worried about what they see as Russian intimidation and hostility, a party with open ties to Russia's ruling forces is unlikely to find many allies in Lithuanian politics or mainstream public support.  
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